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1999

i Publications, consisting of *The Mole* and *i magazine*, are published by the students of Mount Wachusett Community College.

Any student of the college is urged to submit original literary and artistic endeavors to be considered by the staff during the publication selection process.

Works may be submitted to any staff member or dropped in the *i* Publications mailbox across the hallway from the student mailboxes.

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BASIC NECESSITY

By Phyllis Kendall

She has all that a young cat could want,
This energetic, gold-clad pet of mine.
Food. Drink. Plenty of space to run and race,
And toys to play with, toys galore,
Soft furry mice to push and chase
And catch along the polished floor.

All this I remind her as she looks up at me,
Green-gold eyes pleading, tiny voice
Interceding, "Me-ooow!"
"What is it you want, precious one?"
Oh, but I know. I know full well
What she asks with such tenacity:

Just a bit of attention—
Undivided—
For her alone.
Life's most basic necessity.

THE CHRISTMAS CACTUS

By Lori Kovach

She awakes to the sound of his footsteps coming from the next room. Remembering that it is Sunday and that she doesn't have to get up right away, she just lays there with her eyes closed, listening. She hears him go into kitchen. He is always the first up, so he makes the morning coffee. Still lying there with her eyes closed she thinks about her day and all the things that she wants to accomplish. Rolling over and opening her eyes, she looks out the bedroom window. The sun is brightly shining and the sky is a crystal clear blue. It is late January and she knows that the clear blue sky means that it will be very cold outside. She snuggles down in the covers further, feeling the warmth and comfort of her bed. She lingers there in the security of the blankets not quite ready to face the day ahead.

Finally sitting up alongside the bed, she looks for her slippers. One slipper has somehow found its way under the bed, requiring her to make a survey with her hand to retrieve it. She looks over at the alarm clock, 8:30. Sleeping-in on Sundays is her reward to herself for a long week of hard work. Slipping on her robe she makes her way down the hall to the living room. He is there, sitting on the sofa watching the morning news on CNN.

"Good morning, how'd you sleep?" he asks her.

"Morning, okay. You?"

"Good, the coffee will be ready in a couple of minutes."

She goes to the sofa opposite from him and sits, curling her legs up underneath her, for she is cold. They sit there in silence for awhile listening to the morning's top news stories; "U.S. war planes flying over the No-Fly Zone bombed Iraqi anti-aircraft sites again last night... U.S. planes returning safely to their base."

The coffeemaker beeps announcing that the coffee is ready. He goes to the kitchen and pours them both a cup. His with sugar and extra cream, hers with only a little cream. He brings back their coffee and hands her cup to her. Taking a sip of the cup he has handed her, he asks if it is all right.

"It's good. Thanks."

He sits down again on the sofa opposite her and they continue to watch the news. After awhile, the reports become repetitive and they both agree to turn off the TV. They sit for a long time in silence.

She watches him as he looks at the plant on the coffee table. He is looking at it as though it were a child he loved dearly. He had given it to her their first Christmas together, three years ago. It is a Christmas Cactus by name because it was supposed to bloom at Christmas time, but it hadn't bloomed this year. The cactus was just now beginning to form its buds and would soon be full of lush hot pink flowers.

After a time he breaks from his silent contemplation and asks her, "Are you going to take the plant with you when you go?" nodding his head toward the Christmas Cactus.

She thought about it for a few minutes, surprised by the question. "Well, yeah. I had planned to; you gave it to me, remember."

"Oh. Well, yeah you're right, I did give it to you." He pauses for a moment or two and says, "You should take it with you." She watched him as he continued to look at the plant.

"I tell you what, you like it so much you keep it. It's yours," she says with just a tint of snideness to her voice.

"No, no.", he says almost apologetically, "I gave it to you, it's your plant. You take it." They sit there for a time, neither one saying anything, then breaking the silence again, he says, "I'm going to miss that plant."

ALEXIS

By Chris Banahan

Ah, my high school days...how I long to forget them! Perhaps not all of them.

Not "Grease" anyway. I want to savor "Grease."

There are, however, many things I do not care to remember about it. I don't care to remember the performances of any of my fellow actors, or for that matter even my own dashing performance as an extra (or if you would prefer, dancer). I don't want to recall our darling director's headache, which would filter out through his mouth in the form of multiple harangues. Given a choice I would rather forget that the director decided it would give the show a good image to have the cast act as the stage crew. The 101 degree temp I was racked with throughout the performances certainly wasn't a treasured memory and I really want to forget that Lucifer-in-curly-hair, Pat, reminding me how very much I was enjoying it.

Among the things I don't want to forget but will waste no effort in trying to remember is set construction. I was off painting some set or another (I think maybe the hamburger shop) when one of the actresses in the play would come to say four little words that would forever dump my existence on it's head.

"...and this is Alexis."

"Hi, never saw you around here before."

"Just transferred here from Leominster a few days ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry. At least it's over."

Strange things happen to a boy painting a faux hamburger shop in his gym clothes, sometimes. This time, destiny walked into my life and picked up a brush. And to sweeten the deal, she was a transfer student. To her, there was no Chris Banahan, the demented weirdo the rest of my school had grown to love and avoid whenever possible. There was only, me. I felt my heart slam into my

ribcage again and again and again, trying desperately to escape and claim the love denied it for so long, I felt my body moisten with sweat, like it was trying to escape to get a better look at her.

Soon the day ended, she left and I wondered if there was anything else that needed painting, a building perhaps? When that day ended my life began.

I can recall (by accident I assure you, as I would waste no effort in trying to remember it) spending the next few weeks trying to make her acquaintance even further. Specific incidents I don't much recall, however, save one.

"Hey Alexis, care to read my script?" I inquired, proud as hell that not only was I able to finish it but that I was able to get her to read it. Like the five-year old that just gave his mother a mud-pie, I was bounding over her, desperately trying to get her approval.

I consider myself a nice guy. Certainly not somebody to get the kind of look Alexis shot me after she was done reading the first few pages. I should explain that this paper contained less tact than freshmen poetry and more toilet humor than a South Park marathon. She didn't seem to like it very much. So I grabbed my play and looked for something hard to beat my head on.

Three months, summer vacation. My last one. I thought it was over. I thought I had killed any chance of ever winning her heart. Three months of asking myself how I could be so stupid and why I did it. Fall came before the answer did, and thankfully she had forgotten all about it.

Senior year. 180 days of the same monotonous drudgery that you had to put up with for the last eleven years with the reward being to have the yoke lifted if you survived. There was the typical senior "stuff," yearbook, prom, the various college applications, and making sure you don't fail your classes so you have to repeat them. The last days of innocence.

And I spent them all in reverence to Alexis.

She was always there, it seemed. In History, in Gym, English and lunch, especially lunch. A while back our principal, in his never ending crusade to squash

originality, had all the very small, very café-like tables taken out and replaced them with the other kind, the long rectangular ones like those in elementary school. Those who couldn't get a group to accept them into "their" table were basically screwed. For all those in charge cared, these outcasts could eat on the floor, or off the floor, or in the garbage, or out of the garbage, or not at all. It was a testament to high school's true intent. But unlike me, Alexis had friends who welcomed me aboard with open arms. It wasn't a clique per se, but rather an amalgamation of those who would otherwise have eaten off the floor, but that wasn't important. She was in my life, now that was important.

I couldn't help it. In the daytime I felt like I was covered from head to toe in yellow Day-Glo. At night the darkness drowned me because she wasn't there. It was just she and I, swimming in my soul, which she had flooded like a basement. I couldn't eat; I was hungry only for her. I couldn't drink as she filled me to the brim. I couldn't open my eyes for the fear that I wouldn't be able to see her anymore.

There were only three problems.

One, I didn't really know her. I was familiar with who she was, but there's only so much you can learn in school. Was I privy to her life? Did I know her desires, her fears, her motivations? Not really.

How could I remedy that? I could always ask her out I guess...right?

Two, girls like her don't stay available. They always seem to find their way to somebody that doesn't deserve them, and more often than not, who wouldn't deserve the humanity involved in crucifixion with rusty spikes. If she was taken, and I asked, things could have gotten very ugly.

Besides, you don't ask out somebody you don't know. It's a catch-22, I know

.Third, something about "If you don't love yourself, how is somebody else going to?" I hated myself. Three years of high school had taken their toll on me. My sense of self-worth was nil and my self-doubt was big enough to fill Madison Square Garden.

Still, I tried.

First time, homecoming. Something very disturbing about that, I prefer not to think of high school as being my home. But hey, a dance is a dance, a chance is a chance, and I was going to ask her come hell or high water!

Of course, there was the doubt.

"uh, Alexis?"

"Yes."

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I was just wondering if, if you were going to..."

"You're kidding yourself. She's taken. You KNOW it! Deal with it already!"

"...the dance."

"Probably...probably with her BOYFRIEND, YA PUTZ!"

"And I was..."

"He's big."

"I, um..."

"Three hundred pounds if he's an ounce."

"Was wondering if..."

"And socially dysfunctional in the bad way."

"You were, uh..."

"He gonna tear your legs off..."

"Going...to..."

"And ram them up your ass!"

"The...dance. Where'd you go?"

"Told ya, loser."

Maybe I had simply used up my share of her allotted time span. Or maybe she wasn't really paying attention to me to begin with. Or maybe she knew what was coming and decided to avoid it by any means necessary

Or maybe it was just because lunch was over. It was ok, really. Who asks people to dances anymore?

A few months would come to pass before I'd have the opportunity to strike again. This time, it was around the time for the annual Athletic Association Ball. Our teacher had decided to end class a little early and since teenagers can't be made responsible for their own lives, we took the opportunity to socialize. And once again I found myself speaking to Alexis.

"Alexis."

"Yeah."

"Here we go again. Will you get a clue? Stop embarrassing yourself!"

"Are you going to the AA ball?"

"Actually no, I wasn't planning on it."

"See, she ain't going. Now change the subject and escape with your dignity."

"Oh, gee that's a shame...because..."

"Because nothing, idiot, change the subject, CHANGE THE SUBJECT!!"

"I was going to ask you if...um"

"Why don't you just hang yourself by your own entrails. Haven't you figured out yet that you are..."

"You wanted to go...with me."

"Here it comes...why the hell would I want to go with..."

"I'm flattered."

"See, see, see...um, what was that? That wasn't so bad."

So thus, she wasn't going anyway, so there was no point to asking her. And when I did she responded not with the malice and condescension all my insides told me I was worth, but rather with a kind validation of my existence as a human being

"If she felt for you, she would have gone."

I tried not to think about it that much. I already knew. I knew from the

beginning. It was doomed to be unrequited. I knew that. I didn't want to know that. I was the only one spending long, sweat-drenched nights awaiting the day just to be in proximity to the object of my affections. It didn't hurt, really it didn't. It shouldn't have hurt. It shouldn't have hurt. It didn't hurt. It didn't hurt. It didn't hurt....

The mirror hurt. I don't like the picture it paints every time I look into it. I never liked how it penetrated every part of my being. I never did, that was bad enough. But now it was asking questions. I would see my visage in the mirror and it would ask me. "Why go elsewhere when she could have all this?" I never liked that question very much; I especially disliked the way the tone would fluctuate between sarcasm and truth. I never liked the questions I had to ask the mirror back. "What did I do wrong?" "Why am I wrong?" "What is right?" "Why can't I be right?" I shudder at the answers both the mirror and I give.

"I don't know."

I think it might have died then. What I felt, I think it died. She was no longer perfect to me. She was no longer gold to me.

But still, if not gold then a certain sterling silver to be sure.

I was wrong. Nothing gold can stay. I can still see you, Alexis, I can see you now for what you are, not the divine being I saw you as, because I refused to open my eyes. But the beauty you truly are. I'm sorry I couldn't be to you what you were, and in many ways still are, to me. I'm sorry I can't tell you I love you here. Love...is different, it's mutual... and it's something for people with less garbage in their souls than I. So, even though I can't profess my love to you and provide the ending this deserves, I will say this. Every time I see you, every time I'm near you, my very heart skips a beat...that beat belongs to you.

I'M TIRED

By Francis J. O'Malley III

Why can't I write a paper? I've looked through my previous works, I've looked all around. I've talked to friends, listened to family. I drove my car without the radio on. I can't think of one freaking thing to write about. The insomnia that haunts me during the hours of darkness is killing me. All day long I walk through school, work, or whatever social event I go to like an over-cooked piece of broccoli. I am worthless. My mind feels like a warm bowl of tapioca pudding and my body feels like a three day old bowl of Ramen noodles.

I can't sleep. I can't write. I can't find a piece of insanity any place. If I could just start making motions with my hand across a piece of ivory white paper . . . if I could feel the cold steel of a brand new fountain pen grasped in between my fingertips . . . I could fill the lines for days, if I only had a thought.

Maybe, if I could close my eyes and feel the tranquil embrace of a hard night's slumber, or if I wasn't distracted by the sounds of silence that dance through my ears, I would be inspired by the thoughts that visit me. Perhaps I could find exactly what it is I am looking for. I envy those who are not tortured into the early hours of the morning trying to keep their eyes closed, hoping that this will be the moment that they drift.

OUTLOOK

By Kim Peckham

My little son looked down at me,
From way up in an apple tree,
He said, "I'm up so very high,
You won't believe what I can see!"

"There is a castle with a moat,
A bridge, a farm, a billy-goat,
A field of dreams, a leprechaun,
A tiger and a pirate boat!"

"And over there, a mountain peak,
A parrot with a rainbow beak,
A Ferris-wheel, a racing car,
A chocolate-ripple ice cream creek!"

"Behind a giant I see the ocean,
Genies, warlocks, witches' potion,
A deep dark forest, a wishing star,
Soldiers marching with devotion!"

"A spaceship and a bakery cook,
A dragon in a bubbling brook!"
He called to me from lofty perch,
"C'mon up, Mom, and take a look!"

I peered into his shining face,
Then climbed up, too (with not much grace);
I looked around with real surprise,
And whispered, "What a magical place!"

He hugged me tight, so thrilled was he,
That he could share his world with me,
We waved farewell to kingdom wide,
Then climbed down very carefully.

We walked toward home then, hand in hand,
Still talking of the secret land,
That just the two of us could see,
And no one else would understand.

That was many years ago, it's true,
But still, whenever I'm feeling blue,
I climb up high in the apple tree,
And remember the world my little boy knew.

THE TELEPHONE

by John K. Davick

Inventions to make life easier, how we dislike most of them. How they have complicated our lives, made it more repulsive, and forced us to conform to some sadistic rule laid down by would be do-gooders of mankind.

The telephone, how we wonder at this marvelous mystery of communication and how we shudder each time its ring interrupts our lives. How its noise shatters our thoughts and demands instant attention. How its thunderous voice brings fear to our hearts and springs curiosity to our brain trying to figure out who, in their right mind, would dare to bore us with their mundane hum drum life.

Let people write letters, they are easier to ignore.

NIGHT FLIGHT

By Kim Peckham

It is a freezing, bitter cold night. We can see our mingling breath expelled in a white, vaporous mist as we climb into the Skyhawk for the last leg home. As I get settled and strap the three-point seatbelt, I can feel the cold metal buckle through my thick gloves, and though I have on a long, wool coat and scarf, I am so cold my teeth are chattering.

I watch my husband go through the motions of the pre-flight checklist--reaching, adjusting, turning, stretching--like a slow motion Tai Chi, the series of motions so second nature to him he could do them in his sleep. In front of us through the frosted windshield, I can barely make out the shapes and shadows of the runways and the tower.

The sky is black with blue-gray clouds, and we listen to the crackling weather advisory on the radio, the robot-like voice instantly capturing our attention when it cautions us about incoming precipitation. Our eyes meet and hold just briefly.

We put on our headsets and I fiddle for a few seconds, adjusting my microphone. Then, the familiar sputter and spurt of the engine breaks the silence, as it roars to a start. Paul clicks the transmitter four times and, like the sweep of a fairy wand, the runway suddenly appears, brightly lit, in front of us, clearly visible for the first time, as we taxi downwind for takeoff.

At the end of the runway, the plane turns and stops for just a few seconds, and now we are off--rolling down the runway, picking up speed, louder and faster, and then, finally, the familiar, suddenly weightless sensation of liftoff--and we are airborne.

The runway lights shrink and are soon out of sight, and now we are doing a slow turn over the city. The sight is spectacular—twinkling lights spread everywhere below us like a field of stars. Tiny roads and highways with a few miniscule cars on them, buildings tall and small, Lilliputian houses, and everywhere, the lights.

We fly farther out of the city into the darkness. A beautiful, shadowy world of dark forests and occasional lakes lies below. Lights appear only at random intervals now. The sky is indigo, with not another plane in sight for miles.

Flying through a group of clouds, we begin to bump and rock as we hit strong turbulence, and Paul pulls up to 5000 feet to get above it. It is smoother now. Up here time is suspended, and we know it is easy to lose our bearings at night, with our sense of depth perception so distorted.

The small heater is blowing full blast now, and I feel warm and comfortable. The overhead instrument panel light bathes us in crimson. I am grateful for the loud drone of the plane's engine because without the noise, it would be too peaceful and beautiful up here.

Paul asks if I would like to fly over Springfield before turning for home, and I say yes, absolutely. We can see the thousands of bright lights ahead of us in the distance, the glow extending far up above the city, illuminating the dark sky.

Paul reaches for my hand and I turn, smiling, to look at him. He winks at me, says, "Here's looking at you, kid," and gives my hand a squeeze. We fly closer to the lights, content for now just to BE.

RELAXING

By Jason Robinson

I will always remember the most relaxing time of my life. It happened one summer when I was down in Virginia. We had just gotten to Ft. Picket in the middle of June. It must have been a moist 110 in the shade with no wind. The humidity choked you with every breath. The air-conditioning in the old barracks consisted of a single large fan in the middle of the room and a couple of open windows. It didn't do too much in the way of cooling but it at least moved the air around a little.

Top gave us a day to unpack, stretch and explore because the two-day straight convoy had brought us here in good time. There wasn't much exploring except for the odd trip to the PX down the street for some junk food, and the class six around the corner for some beer. Mostly everyone just slept, soldiers just crashed on anything they could get comfortable on. Dozing bodies were strewn everywhere like freshly logged trees still dressed in green. Prime real estate was anything directly in front of the large fan. We slept on footlockers pulled together like rafts on the bright tile, piled with sleeping bags like great mountains, and for the truly desperate the cool white linoleum floor itself was a refuge from the heat. I was one of the first into the bay; therefore I got a real bed near the fan. The old bunk-bed screeched and groaned when I moved and there were a couple of moments when I thought it was just going to fall apart, but it didn't and it was comfortable.

After a long day of lying around, and doing pretty much nothing except talking of things we planed to do at camp that year, and catching bugs as they flew past in the turbulence of the fan, my friends slowly found sleep, but all I found was my Walkman. I put in something to hopefully drown out the fan and the snoring.

Just then it happened; in the distance I could hear far off artillery shells. There was the old familiar whistle followed by the loud crack as the round exploded on its target. Through my window there were small flashes of light silhouetting the distant hills and buildings against the night sky. The Fort we were on was an old one with a lot of abandoned buildings everywhere. It looked like a ghost town with its battered streets and dilapidated houses.

I went outside to the rickety old balcony just after eleven for a better view. The heat had died down now but the air was still stale. I tuned in my radio to the local stations to see what types of music I could find. There was a clear soft rock station I thought would help me to sleep. The music went along with the explosions perfectly. The dance of fire and explosion, and the music blended beautifully.

As I drifted off to sleep knowing that there would be an early wakeup and a lot of work tomorrow with plenty of craziness finding gear and places to put it all, for the moment it was peaceful.

THE DECISION

By Jason Kotoch

4:30

Beep, beep, beep, beep, bee...

And so he rises, awakened by the usual heartless alarm clock. The steelworker sits at the end of the bed, rubbing his aging eyes. Everything is dark, the air and the floor sting his flesh like a hundred needles on a mission to break his skin, but the skin has been worked into a leathery shield that the strength of a sword could not penetrate. His daily routine begins with a groggy walk to the washroom. He passes the door to the outside, bolted three times over. Stumbling, he enters the washroom. He slides his hand up the wall, finds the switch, and turns the lights on. One of the lights flickers, like a strobe, the other died a month ago. He has had no time to repair it, so the washroom is dim, gray, like a rainy Sunday funeral. Though not dead, the washroom as well as the rest of the box shaped apartment lacks life. The steelworker grasps the tarnished sink; he raises his head and looks at his wrinkled face in the oval mirror; his eyes are glossed over with salt-water memories of his past.

"Well. Good morning," he says to his reflection.

"What's new, John?" His eyes dim, as if he is troubled that the reflection can't talk back. He goes on to rinse his mouth out with salt and baking soda and a half-cup of water. He doesn't comb his hair; he just pulls on a black wool hat that his friend gave him before he died. At five o'clock he puts on a dark blue jacket that has "Carter Metal Fabrication" embroidered on the back. John's worked there for 37 years, his position is mold technician. He walks towards the door, unlocks it and descends down the screeching steps that seemed to speak to him, sending him on his way. He loved the stairs; it was comforting to hear them say goodbye. But today, hidden in their voices, there is a screaming, uncontrollable cry for freedom. Stopping halfway down, he takes a deep breath and then continues down. On the last step he stops again, this time he looks up at the door, worn red, cracked. Comfort lay beyond that door; yet he is, as always, heading out to work. For a brief moment his thoughts lingered into the deepest part of his being.

"NO, goddamit!" he shouted at himself. A proud man never thinks of giving up. Linger deeper now, ancient thoughts are projected. He tries to stop himself, but it is no use. John wanted to quit his job. His life, his past, present, what made him him. Trying to reach some logical, reasonable conclusion, he realized that his position was going to be "discontinued" after the change that was to happen. A bigger company had bought Carter's and was going to be changing policy. He couldn't help but to fear for his job, nor did he try not to fear. He so desperately wanted to rest. He desired the warmth of his bed and a hot cup of Earl Grey. So he did what he had to do. John took off his hat, walked upstairs, and went to sleep.

CHRISTMAS PAST

By Jeanne Hue

'Tis the thirteenth day of Christmas. The stockings are rumpled into the corner behind the tree. Three or four ornaments are sitting on the bookcase, dropped there, as they fell from the tree, by a hurrying passer-by. The garland droops from the left side while most of the tinsel on the lower branches has been ingested and tossed back up onto the carpet by the family cats. The gifts have been removed, but the tissue and boxes remain. And there's a large black hole where one string of lights has given its last twinkle.

The postman brings credit card bills and the budget has been severely over-taxed by last minute shopping. In the depths of the refrigerator live strange and smelly organisms that used to be leftovers, and going barefoot is becoming precarious as more and more needles sift downward to embed themselves deeply into the carpet, there to await an unwary walker.

There are Christmas cards everywhere, lying wherever they fall as they unfasten themselves from the tape that refuses to come off the woodwork. The figures in the Crèche wear a furry coat of gray dust, while the windowsill sports a layer of dried, crumpled red leaves from a fast fading poinsettia.

Now is the time to dismantle the tree, carry the empty boxes to the attic and clean out the refrigerator. We'll move the furniture back to the usual places, pay off the bills, and have the carpet cleaned. Then we can wait impatiently to do it all over again, next year.

IT WAS RAINING

By Shannon Hard

It was raining and EE had spent a dollar at the arcade, and had been wearing the same black, patched-pocket corduroys for a week. His name was EE because of the crickets, but he had been born Robert James Oskar Anthony. Mama had called him EE and his aunt had told him so.

When he was a potato-sized child, he had been on the porch, holding the railing and rocking back on his round little heels, listening to the dusk, and the crickets spoke. He heard tiny operas and melodies about summer and the shimmering waves of hot light and the droning of bugs in the trees and the lightness and hope that a slender summer breeze would bring on its way through the gauzy white curtains. They told him about the shocking bang that the screen door would make after a careless child had passed through, running on dusty brown bare feet. Robert James Oskar Anthony listened sagely to all of this, and became transported with delight. He cried "EE!" in imitation, and his black-haired Mama who was taller than the world picked him up and turned his face up to her broad smile and said "Yes, my boy, you and the crickets." She never said another word— she died on that porch in the light from the west, she died in the fading light of her last sun.

An aunt seized the boy and had raised him ever since. He was a small kiddo with dusk-colored skin and fathomless black eyes, like round wet black olives in clear water. His black hair stuck up everywhere, defying the careful efforts of his best aunt and her determined comb. "Damn it boy, your hair is possessed by the angel of antigravity," she would say as she raked her fierce purple comb over his small cranium. She would lick her broad thumbs and pull them across EE's eyebrows, smoothing the round black hairs.

He still lived with his aunt in her enormous Victorian tucked away on a side street. The house was big and brown and looked very much like an

abstract cow. It had a steep roof that was sharp like the bone ridge of a cow's back, and the large bay windows looked kindly upon the world with a tired bovine patience.

The town that he lived in was small, with a few stores, and, on the outskirts, a mill. There were less people than buildings, and many families owned their dwelling and at least one more building. When the other industries had closed down long ago, there were many families that fled the town, often leaving belongings and abandoning houses without bothering to sell them. This provided EE with a vast array of places to play in. His favorite abandoned house was a massive white structure with a mansard roof and a rotting barn, much like a decaying tooth next to it. He would creep in through the back door, even though he could have gone through the front without anyone noticing or caring.

The back door was made of thick oak, and the doorknob was chipped and china-white. It turned rustily, but always worked. He usually went there after he was through playing at the arcade, which is what he did today.

After he had fed the merciless video game his last luminous quarter, he wiped his sweaty hands on the dusty fabric of his pants and stood up. He looked out of the open door and considered the rain for a moment. He was deciding whether to go straight home or go to his abandoned house. He quickly chose the abandoned house. He sprinted out of the arcade and down the street. It was only three short blocks to Carter Street, where the dilapidated mansion was. When he got there, he walked slowly and carefully around to the back. He knew that he would never be noticed, but he liked the thrill of imagined disobedience. He turned the white doorknob, observing his vague distorted reflection in its depthless shine. He pushed the warped door inwards, and stepped into the familiar cool darkness of the kitchen. An old stove sat against the wall, proclaiming the brand "Tiger." It was a wood burning range with an iron top and four circles, two large and two small, for the burners. He liked to swing open the iron door in back of the oven, inhaling the scent of wood long since incinerated.

EE decided to explore the attic rooms today. He walked through a narrow and abrupt corridor from the kitchen into the foyer. He studied the inside of the great front door. There was an enormous deadbolt, in the unlocked position, almost exactly in the middle of the door. The wood was coated with clear varnish, which made the wood look slightly orange. The varnish was cracked, betraying the age of the door. A peephole was at eye level for someone slightly older or taller than EE. It lay embedded in the door like the eye of a wary Cyclops. The stairs were to his right, and they wound upwards majestically. EE wished fervently that he had brought his Slinky so that he might full appreciate the grand sweep of that staircase. Sighing at the missed opportunity, he stepped excitedly up the remaining stairs. At the first landing, he spied a stained glass window glowing with rainy gray daylight. The window showed a night sky, the moon shining full and pendulous above the glassy calm of the purple lake below it. A green fish swam eternally in the hollow water, and the moon was mimicked by the tiny satellites in its eyes. EE was instantly enraptured by the window, and only continued on his ascension by reminding himself that he could view the miraculous window again later.

The next flight of stairs brought him up to a cold attic that retained its chill in spite of the warm day. EE shivered and viewed three trunks set against the wall on his right. A mannequin stood ghostlike in front of the window. He approached the first trunk and pried it open. Its ancient rusty hinges squealed miserably, and he found himself almost apologizing for the discomfort he seemed to be causing. The inside of the trunk was aglow with the lunar whiteness of a heap of sheets. Some were trimmed with eyelet lace, but most were plain cotton. EE closed the trunk and opened the next one.

This trunk was full of buttons: large and small, some bone-white, others jet, and several red. There were a few rhinestone-encrusted clasps that seemed to have been taken from a pair of pretty shoes. EE shoved both hands into the mass of buttons and trickled them through his fingers like sand.

He opened the last trunk, and was dazzled by the sight of shoes. They appeared to be mostly unworn, though they were very old. A pair of button boots lay on top of the pile, and he grasped them firmly by their tiny pointy heels. He ran his fingertips over the soft white leather and shook them. They flapped like albino batwings. He cast them aside and examined a pair of spats. He looked down at his own canvas sneakers with their rainbow laces and slipped the spats over them. He pranced around and looked for a mirror. Finding none, he took the spats off and folded them into his pocket for potential future use.

He shuffled his feet in the decades of dust, and headed for the stairs. He looked up, briefly, and noticed a faint glimmering somewhere above his head. It was sun-colored, and because it was raining, that was suspicious. EE stopped and stared impolitely at the radiant thread. He reached up and found himself clutching a thin gold chain. On the chain was a small locket, and in the locket was a much smaller EE. Mystified, he looked at the picture, and the picture, equally confused, looked back at him. EE was momentarily overwhelmed, and thought it best to leave immediately. He fled down the stairs, paused briefly at the beautiful window, and hurried home.

When he reached the vine-covered porch of his house, he wrenched open the door and pounded up the stairs, searching for his aunt. He found her sitting serenely in the parlor, knitting something and sipping currant wine.

"What is this?" EE demanded breathlessly.

"Well, it looks like a picture of you," said his aunt.

"Yes, but why did I find it in that house?"

"What house?"

"The ruined mansion that has a stained glass window with a moon and a fish and it has three trunks in the attic and a stove that says tiger in the kitchen and a spiraling staircase and I found this in the rafters; it was shining, and look!"

"Oh, that house. Well, when I was young and your Mama was younger, we used to play in there. I don't know why your picture would be hanging from a rafter, though. I think that was your Mama's necklace. She used to wear it a lot, until she died.

EE was breathless with shock. His aunt was not. While she continued knitting, he started to run. It was his habit when he was upset; the speed and exertion of running seemed to ameliorate his unhappiness. He bounded up the stairs to his room and lay on his quilt-covered bed. He listened to the rain galloping across the roof and stared at his picture. He then heard an unfamiliar wail. Looking out of his window, he saw red trucks hurrying towards a huge column of smoke and flames. The house was on fire.

EE leapt from his room as his aunt made some comment about how he was always charging everywhere like a crazed bull. Heedlessly, he ran. The house was collapsing in on itself just as he arrived. A vagrant, frantically chewing on his nails, was giving some sort of information to the police. EE saw the fantastic window start to crumble as the side of the house caved in. He heard a pop, and glass flew into the wet grass, hissing. Somehow the fish remained intact inside its borders and it spun through the damp air. It landed in an old lilac bush and melted around a branch so that its tail merged with the tip of its face. The fish's eyes reflected the vanished moon, and EE stumbled home, dazed.

He would not speak or eat for three days, only venturing out of his room at night to fetch a glass of water. He would lie silently in his bed, sipping his water until the sun rose and his aunt emerged from her room. He mourned the window, his mother, the trunk of buttons, and then,...and then he remembered the spats that he had carefully tucked away and forgotten. He pulled them from his pocket and turned the old leather over and over in his hands. He took a pair of shiny black dress shoes from his closet, put them on, and tied the laces in square little bows. He put the spats on over them, and stood up. Walking to the floor length mirror on the outside of his aunt's door, he turned and admired them. He danced back and forth, not even hearing his aunt's approach.

"EE," she said, and he turned and looked at her. "Come down and eat something."

He followed her slowly down the stairs and out onto the porch, where she had set out two plates and platters of different things for breakfast. The sun was starting to rise, and the crickets were out. EE paused and walked to the side of the porch. He stretched out his hands and grasped the railing. Rocking back on his heels, he closed his eyes and sang in the salmon-colored dawn.

WRITER'S BLOCK

By Jeanne Hue

The muse is dead...
or perhaps she's only tired,
at a loss for words.
Dregs of phrases,
tumbling around in my head,
refuse to coalesce into
something which makes sense.

Is this having nothing to say,
or maybe having too much?
So many thoughts and ideas,
that they fall over each other;
all trying to be uttered,
before the others.

Close your eyes,
relax your mind,
think of nothing.
Then see what rises
to the surface first.
That's the one.

ONE MORNING

By Eric Peabody

The gritty feeling from the dust dried the corners of my mouth and left a sandy, salt-like taste. My stomach rumbled, quivered, and then gently asked for water, as it moaned in thirst. I looked restlessly for my canteen, and with a gasp for air I stretched out from my night's slumber. The first gulp cured all my ailments, and I felt the water flow smoothly into the bowels of hell. I swung my legs over the side of my cot and slowly eased my feet into the cold black leather boots that had become beige from use. As I stood up I heard the bones in my lower back crack. I chuckled, and with pain, I crawled outside.

The land was barren and I felt as though gigantic, beige-colored giants, who sat huddled together, far in the distance, had surrounded me. Civilization seemed thousands of miles away and out of reach. The thought of being trapped in this God-forsaken dust bowl rattled my nerves. Walking from the ragged green canvas tent that flapped in the wind, I noticed that the sun was hitting the earth with tremendous force, which created small heat waves that rose from the ground. My neck and ears felt burnt from its fiery fury.

My uniform, which was covered with salt stains, called me to attention as it had every morning. The aroma of sweat filled the dusty air, and, as I pulled my jacket over my tight green T-shirt, the smell became worse. As I looked down I noticed that my Uncle Sam had branded my shirt.

In the distance I could see the huge metal beast of a machine, which I redundantly harness myself into every morning for a hard day's work. Later, I looked back at the Tent City from my lofty perch, and, with a quick pause, I yearned for my uncomfortable cot. As I guided the machine down the lonely desert road I gripped the steering wheel tightly and I thought of home.

Excerpts from "WILLIAM'S GIFT"

By Kim Peckham

My father's father had to drop out of school in the seventh grade to go to work in his family's bakery. He never forgave his father for this injustice and, out of spite and anger, changed his given name from "Wilhelm" to "William". For the rest of his life he voraciously devoured books, magazines, newspapers—whatever he could find on any subject—and henceforth became a self-educated man who could converse with anyone about any topic whatsoever.

It was on my grandfather's lap that I first began to love books; I would sit quietly, my face pressed against the sun-dried clean of his shirt, smelling ink mixed with Canada mints, hair tonic, and pipe tobacco; I would stare at letters which held no meaning for me, his chin resting on top of my small head, his powerful hands gently turning the pages of musty books with worn leather covers, as he read silently to himself, or, if it was poetry, aloud to me, sometimes lulling me to sleep with the rhythm and cadence of his voice.

Later, when I was older and could understand the words, he enthralled me with tales of adventure and legend recounted with an enthusiasm so contagious I soon recited all of my favorite parts along with him.

My grandfather was rarely without a book in his hands, and he had an incredible repertoire of material and knowledge, a poem for every circumstance and happening. He was especially animated telling stories on cool summer nights around the blazing bonfire which caused his thick hair and still handsome face to glow with a magical aura and the great sadness which hung about him to disappear, at least for a little while.

Then in the summer of 1971, when I was twelve years old, a sense of foreboding surrounded us like a fog. We felt it enveloping us, though we didn't talk about it—fate perched on a cliff waiting to jump—a tragedy unfolding which we were all helpless to prevent. All through that long, steamy summer, my father lay dying

in a hospital halfway across the country. I rocked in a hammock under tall, cool pines, buried between the pages of books while my grandparents looked after me, trying hard not to let me see their worried faces and wiped-away tears.

I found my solace in books and in my imaginings: when taking the creaky, old, wooden rowboat out for a glide on the lake, I was the Lady of Shallott; or when diving into the lake's shimmering surface and racing across to the opposite shore, I was kicking frantically to maintain my narrow American lead over France; or when standing under the pounding waterfall below the footbridge which led to the beach, I was Guinevere washing my hair, pretending not to notice Lancelot hidden in the shadows among sun-dappled trees, his heart leaping wildly at the sight of me.

This kept me from losing my mind that August, from slipping into a darkness so deep I might never find my way back. If I had not had books to read, I wouldn't have been able to bear it—away from my mother, my father, my brothers who had all been farmed out to various relatives—being alive and healthy while my father was fighting for his life in a place too far away for me to see him, too far for me to throw my arms around his neck and tell him how much I loved him.

One night, unable to sleep, as I lay awake listening to a chorus of peepers and bullfrogs, I heard another, muffled sound, and being unable to guess what it could be, followed the sound out to the dark screened porch where I could see my grandfather, sitting in his chair bent over an open book, his nightly ritual. The light from a reading lamp shone on his face, which I was shocked to discover was wet with tears, his shoulders heaving, as great, gasping sobs escaped from his mouth.

I backed into the shadowy doorway, feeling the cool stones under my bare feet, thrilled and amazed that written words could have the power to make my grandfather cry. I snuck back to bed, curiosity keeping me awake half the night, and early the next morning hurried silently out to the porch as soon as I woke.

The book my grandfather had been reading was on top of a small table close to the arm of his chair, and as I picked it up it fell open to the middle, where something sticking out from between the pages marked the place he had last been reading.

Anxious to view the wondrous words that I presumed must be written there, I found myself instead staring at a black and white photograph of my father at about ten years old, smiling shyly into the camera from his perch on a huge rock, sunshine glinting off the top of his blonde head.

Too surprised to register any emotion except shock, I snapped the book shut and placed it back on the small table. It was not until much later that night that I allowed myself to think about what I had learned, as I realized that my grandfather had also found his solace in books that summer, hiding his grief between the pages of one of his favorites.

Only now, years later, do I fully realize the anguish my grandfather must have been feeling that summer, yet he kept up a brave front just for me, hugging me, holding me, while the son of his heart lay dying, asking me what did I think about the voice Jane Ayre heard calling in the stormy night, and telling me that he knew just how Thoreau felt when he wrote, "Sic Vita."

We were kindred souls, he and I. Though the story of his life turned out much differently than he had dreamed, he never revealed his private sorrows, but looked for life's joys, and by his example, showed me a way to survive.

Oh, dear grandfather, these tears are for you. I was not old enough or wise enough to tell you what you should have been told—that you saved my life that summer and many times since—that you gave me a gift no one can ever take away from me—that I am rich with memories—and that I can never thank you enough.

SILVER & GOLD

By Jeanne Hue

The rain plays a staccato tune upon the glass,
accompanying the soprano keen of the wind.
In the basement, the furnace mutters to itself
as though complaining of the noisy duet outside.
And snuggled deep into your covers,
you sleep fitfully through the night,
subconsciously knowing your world is changing.

In the morning, the tune has changed,
castanets clicking away outside your windows,
and the air filled with a cellophane-like crackle.
You open the blinds to a silver landscape
blending into a pre-dawn gray sky.
Every twig and blade of grass encased
in a glass chrysalis... fragile,
yet giving the appearance of steel.

Suddenly, there to the east,
a streak of light across the horizon.
And you watch in awe
as the ever-widening band of morning
slowly turns the pewter world
to a glittering, shimmering panorama
of golden gems. But the beauty is fleeting,
for the warmth of the day
will soon turn this sparkling scene
to everyday dross.

DAD

By Eric Peabody

Small noises, the noises you hear when older people attempt to move. The grunts and moans you can sometimes hear. I hear them early in the morning when my dad is preparing for his day. My dad is not old by any means, but he's no spring chicken, either.

Ragged, torn and worn from use are the shirts he wears. I watch him button each button, one at a time. He says, "When I was your age, I had a wife and two kids." I have no reply.

When I see him in his old worn-out clothes and with his cockeyed hat sitting atop his head, I smile, laugh a little and say nothing. I have never thanked him for the life he has given me. My life is easy, compared to his. My dad gives his life to make mine and my family's satisfying. That feeling will bring a tear to any man's eye. I have a hard time when it comes to expressing my feelings.

I love you, Dad, and thanks for your support.

ILLUSIONS

By Denise Tagan

I am the voice of rain falling,
of icy fingers steadily tapping
on the rooftop of your sleeping brain.
I am the flame that ignites the candle,
lighting the doorways and corners
of your tortured dreams.
I am the squeak in the floorboards,
or the creak of the stairs, as you climb—
reliable as the chimes of your hallway clock.

I am the shape of crusted snowflakes
silently forming shimmering angles
on the frosted panes of your attic window.
I am the string that holds the pearls
around your tender ivory neck,
I am rose-water scents and swept up hair,
Or the broom behind your pantry door,
with dingy bristles worn from time,
sweeping the crumbs of age.
And I am your muddy shoes before the hearth,
the tired soles of your overworked body,
and the callused palms of your underpaid mind.

I am the greatest fear in your heart,
the gasp in your breath,
the emptiness of your pocket,
and the tears in your eyes,
the judgment you make,
and the truth when you wake,
the nightmare in the dark,
and the joy in the morning,
the cry that you utter,
or the pain you conceal.
I am
the guardian
of your own illusions.

GARDENING AT MIDNIGHT

by Kim Peckham

olfactory paradise

scent of musk and sweat

mingling on fingers and thighs

emerald ferns

wet with morning

smell of loam

rich moist earth

salty spray

glistening lips

amber drenched tongues of flame

licking the senses

electric pulse

flashing indigo and violet

night storm singing

silver edged midnight

scented with thunder

ANOTHER DAY

By Lauren Melnicki

She is staying with us for the week—my great aunt who is in her late eighties, but acts as if she were a young girl, since being old just isn't possible in her world. It's been tough, though, real tough. She doesn't know who I am, or where she is, or what she is doing here. I caught her crying in her favorite chair. I didn't interrupt, but rather stepped back and assumed her sadness. She is lonely, scared, confused, lost in a world not familiar to her. The world she once knew is now a world scrambled about in her mind, and she can't put it together. Many pieces are not there anymore. I feel for her. I try to imagine what it would be like to be in her shoes.

I held her hand to reassure her she was not alone. She didn't hide her tears; she let them fall wherever they fell, unlike a child who would only hide her face and wipe them cleanly away, denying that she ever did cry. It didn't take long for her to smile, though, and carry on with her day. Still, confusion will now always be her best friend. She knows she's not all right; she knows she is sick and "out of her mind," as she says most often. She still goes on with a smile, though, probably not knowing what she said or did three minutes before. She always gets through, telling herself and others that she'll be all right. That's how I think she manages her days, and I admire that optimism. As old and confused as she is, she lives everyday as if it were her last. And that's why I think she's still here; her will to live brings her another day.

THE USUAL

By Joy Clarkson

The smoke was so thick that there was no chance for a thought to escape. The walls were yellow and tarnished. The restaurant was full of chain smokers. The non-smokers sacrificed their health to hours of conversation with second-hand smoke and their friends. Most of the kids there usually subjected themselves to lack of sleep and bottomless cups of the usual. Everyone held their own identity, but had no problem conversing with anyone that passed through the cloudy smoking section. The waitresses were sweet and always eager to involve themselves in the conversations they constantly poured coffee for. So, what was it that kept these kids willfully restrained in their seats? It could have been the high test Bickford coffee, a cheaper way to smoke without purchasing cigarettes, or the third degree burns you often encountered from careless coffee pouring. Maybe it was just too complex to explain.

My friend, Alec, and I were religious Bickford customers. To miss a night at the usual would be devastating. This would mean not seeing Gabe and Will. Gabe is an abnormally large Navy Seal (who I was so foolishly tricked into believing) and Will was a Philosophy major, once upon a time. Life didn't get much better than hanging out with a bunch of UNH dropouts. Who needs a degree to have an intellectual conversation anyway. We would sit for hours till we became delirious from too much caffeine. People would eventually break through the smoke and snap out of their fairy-tale lives back to reality.

OK, so maybe it was a poor excuse for existence—nah, anyway, conversation was convenient and, hell, cigarettes were cheap.

LUCY

By Shannon Hard

Do you know how beautiful the river is at night? It lies there like some dark animal, twining towards the north. I can hear it through the skeletal winter trees, and see it beyond the cold curve of the graveyard wall. It hisses and laughs and carries debris from the meadows slightly east; it inundates the low fields in the springtime, and in the almost-springtime, which is now.

It was there, by the river that I found this girl, all corn-colored; yellow hair, skin as translucent and colorless as corn-silk. She was lying in the grass, which is corn-colored too, and I almost didn't see her. I very nearly stepped on her frail stomach as I bounded through the meadow in uncouth boots. She shrieked faintly as my sinister heel swung over her head, and I was surprised by the sound, as well as the feeling of a small hand fearfully grasping my foot. This was in the lazy August of last year.

I looked down and she looked up. I was surprised by the wraithlike corn-girl and she was equally surprised at me. She was wearing a yellow dress, reminiscent of a scene from a prairie western. Her skin was so pale that I could almost see the minuscule threads of blood vessels and nerves coursing through her face and arms.

She relinquished my boot, and I sat down next to her to speak and recover from the shock. She was now sitting up. I apologized for almost treading on her, and she mumbled something that I couldn't understand.

Attempting to be friendly, I said, "What's your name?"

"Lucy," she replied, sniffing slightly and scratching her arm.

"So, do you often lie in the middle of open fields, waiting to be stepped on?"

She shrugged, and smiled in a sideways fashion. I peered at her and she squinted back.

"I was lookin' at clouds, ya know. They change shapes, see, and become things."

I leaned back and looked at the sky. I pointed and said "A dragon!" Lucy squealed and covered her head. "No," I said, "It's a cloud."

She looked up with those empty eyes and said, "'Tis a cow."

I lay back on the grass and stared at the sky, searching blindly for my peppermints. I pulled the box out and offered her one. She accepted it and blithely popped it into her mouth.

"So, Lucy, where do you live?" I am abysmal at making any kind of conversation. (Whatever region of the brain that governs small talk must have been extracted from me in infancy.)

"Over there," she gestured vaguely with one outstretched hand. Apparently she was suffering from the same social deficiency that I was.

"Ah." I was growing tired of looking at the clouds and trying to converse. I asked her if she would like to go for a walk. She said that she would. We both got up, dusting bits of dry grass off our clothes and started off in the direction of the cemetery, which is a lovely place to sit on hot days. Our shoes made prints in the sand left over from the winter.

When we reached the graveyard, the sun was already setting. The stones threw shadows on each other, and we sat on the slope of the mausoleum's grass-covered roof. I tried to think of more things to say, but couldn't. We had migrated to the granite curbing that surrounded a large plot. Fireflies were emerging like accessible stars. We stared into the dusk, and listened to the river. I stood up and stretched.

"Well, I guess I'd better go home."

"I think I'll stay here for a while longer," she said. "Okay. See you later," I said, even though I was sure that I would not.

I walked down the steps and started down the road. I looked back, wondering if she was real, or something I'd just imagined. Real or not, she was still perched canary-like on the curbing. The setting sun had turned her into a sentient flame. I turned around and walked home.

AL'S PLACE

By Collins Beaton

From early in my sophomore year until shortly after I graduated from high school, I spent many hours working out at the old Iron World Gym, or better known to us as Al's. Located in an old factory in the back alleys of Main Street, Gardner, Al's was unique in every way. Mazes of old, noisy pipes ran across the low ceiling. The tired, creaky, wooden floor was all different heights, depending on where you stood. Framed pictures and yellowing magazine posters of weightlifters adorned the mirrored walls and wooden beams. And then there was Al's office--full of trophies, a couple of worn-out couches, a TV, coffee table, a gas stove, and a small fridge.

Every time I went in, Al would greet me with a "Hey, buddy," or "Big guy, how ya doing?" Then I'd hit the weights. In between sets I'd stick my head out the window for some fresh air and a look at the surrounding abandoned factories that once were bursting full of furniture workers a century ago, but now lay empty and falling apart. After the workout, I'd change and take a rest on Al's couch. We'd watch TV and shoot the bull for a while. He'd make sure I was doing well in school and staying out of trouble, give me tips on weightlifting, and tell stories of his past. The funny thing is, all this time I don't even think he knew my name. After a while, I'd pound down the steep stairs to the door, cross the train tracks and pass the factories, and come back the next day or I was in trouble with Al.

In the summer of '97, he moved the gym about half a mile down the road. It's all brand new in there, no creaky floors, no chipped paint. There is new equipment, new weights, even a little store to sell weight-gainer, drinks, equipment. But it isn't the same. It looks like any other gym you see these

days. I still work out at the gym in the summers, and I look forward to visiting with Al. But I can't help but look around at the new, modern gym and think about all the great times in the old one.

O BLACK ANNA

By Shannon Hard

O Black Anna

with your face like the moon
smiling round and luminous above me

O Black Anna

who sat in the dust shelling peas
beneath the tall dark spreading elm trees

O Black Anna

who pulled children into this world
and closed the eyes
of the people going into the next

O Black Anna

give me your ring, your hair, your hands
For they are like the warming sun

And I am transparent

and cold.

BALANCING ACT

By Phyllis Kendall

I'm sitting on a barstool in Ceil's kitchen, my hands hugging a mug of hot chocolate. It's cold outside, but I think I'm really trying to recapture a warmth that has nothing to do with "outside."

Ceil and I live a five-minute walk and a continent apart. I admire Ceil. She is adventurous, out-going, able to see rainbows where others see only rain. She looks at you with the full attention of a general inspecting her troops, a compassionate general. She seems to read the inside of you, know the right thing to say and when. And when need be, instead of platitudes, she can expound a bit of wisdom.

Ceil's mug of chocolate is cooling on the counter. She has disappeared with a tray of cookies and drinks for Norm and their son, who are working on the upstairs apartment. To keep me company she has wound up her newest music box, one she and Norm discovered in a shop in some out-of-the-way place. I'm fascinated by the clown whirling his dance as the top revolves. A merry clown with a bright smile, an equally bright red pom-pom nose, and enormous black eyes half-visible under his eyelids. He balances, one foot tip-toe on a beach ball, the other hung in the air. The tune is vaguely familiar, probably something played under the circus tents of our childhood.

I become lost in thought. How long have we known each other, been friends? I consider Ceil one of my best friends. Not that we see each other often or chat on the phone regularly. It's that we can open the gates of our deepest feelings and allow the other inside, knowing that confidences are just that.

We live in entirely different worlds. Ceil is devoted to husband, children, grand-children, the works. For a long time I had been bound by the intertwined links of love and duty. The links are broken. Now there is freedom and all that goes with it.

Ceil has returned. We make a bit of small talk, then, unusual for us, just sit quietly. She knows I am somewhere else. She doesn't want to intrude. I glance at the clown, now motionless with no music. I look beyond colorful figurines lining the shelves of the bay window. The wind has picked up and the sky is darkening. I make a move to leave. Disappointment crosses her face. She offers to drive me home. "I'll beat the storm," I tell her. "I need fresh air."

She scoops cookies from the plate on the counter into a zip-lock bag. She pushes the bag into my hands. "Call when you get in." It's the reassuring tone she uses to soothe a restless grandchild.

One has to walk with downcast eyes to avoid tripping on the broken sidewalk. I walk carefully, here on a lawn, there stepping over cracked pieces of asphalt, all the while clutching the bag of cookies as a child clutches a favorite toy. Ahead, a pool of stagnant rainwater fills a large depression in the asphalt. I stop; consider.

The bottom of my pant leg is soaked. Cold water is seeping through my shoe into my heavy sock and it feels good. I'll tell Ceil it was the fault of her little music-box clown. We'll laugh together. I'm starting to unlock the gate.

TWILIGHT

By Denise Tagan

Stomping up the stairs like claps of thunder shaking the foundation, he flings open the door to his bedroom. Writhing in anger, he sends a desk lamp crashing to the floor, shattering the bulb into a million tiny fragmented pieces. Deliberately, he screams at the top of his lungs, "I...HATE...EVERYONE... IN...THIS...HOUSE!!!"

Books and papers float to the ground as his arms swirl about in a teenage frenzy of rage and powerlessness. No sense of reasoning can calm his unleashed emotions.

He clenches his hands, twisting his face into a contorted sneer as he glances toward the door, where he has discovered that he is being watched. In frustrated surrender, he throws himself face down on the bed. With his chest heaving, and gulping for breaths, he sobs into a pillow.

I wonder if I should dare to enter. Perhaps he needs more time. But when is it ever the right moment to break through to his explosive battle with his own adolescence? I look at the gangly arms and legs strewn across the bed. He has the hands and feet of a man but the sensitivity of a child. Approaching his crumpled body, I take a small corner of the bed for myself, well aware to avoid any attempt to control him. This moment is all his. All I can do is stand by and wait. "LEAVE...ME...ALONE!" he chokes, his voice muffled through the wall of the tear-soaked pillow. Watching him lying there, I suddenly realize that his blond hair has grown darker, even the texture has changed, and I guess that I hadn't noticed. When did that happen? As his shoulders quiver and his fists tighten around rumpled bed covers, I sadly remember when it was, oh so easy to be there for

him. To wipe away his small problems and still be a hero. When did it begin to get so complicated? When did we begin to drift apart?

He quiets now, turning his blotched and reddened cheek towards the window where I'll be sure to see. Coiling into his usual fetal position, he furrows his brow and lowers his lip into a sulky pout that resembles a childhood frown. My instinct is to hold him close like the little boy he'll always be to me. But I know that is exactly what's wrong. I know that my son is struggling to be a man.

I sigh and pat his shoulder, tenderly, but he jerks away in adamant response. Too soon, I think. I probably should go. Quietly, I stand and start to walk away. Reaching for the door, I hear him, behind me, modestly ask, "Mom? Where are you going?"

Looking there on the bed, I see his head popped up like a turtle peeking out from under its shell. His expression is trapped in the limbo between two worlds he can't understand. I think of how much he looks just like his father at this very minute, and inside I am silently relieved.

I walk back over to my little place on the bed. Sitting down again, I calmly affirm, "I'm right here." Taking a chance, I reach under the pillow and latch onto a stiff wrist, uncurling the rigid fingers one by one until at last, they soften their hold and wrap themselves around my own.

There is a quiet lull in our conversation. It begins to feel warm and safe, again. As the hushed shadows of twilight begin to fall across the room in familiar patterns, the arguable details of the last hour become insignificant, and begin to fade away. Only the love remains.

IMPOSSIBLE DREAMS

By Jamie Goodgion

I somehow felt everything would be all right. I felt the cold ocean waves playing at my feet as we comfortably made our way up the empty beach. There was nobody there, not even us. The monotonous *whoooooshhhhh* of water attacking beach, and then retreating again and again, mixed with the million stars looking curiously down on us, put us somewhere else that night. Somewhere we knew we shouldn't be, but somewhere we had to be.

It's always wrong in somebody's eyes. I didn't expect it to be mine that night, but to my surprise, a tinge of guilt rummaged through my body until I let it escape me as quickly as it had come. Something else had caught my eye. The soft smile of my company gazing at me, waiting for me to speak, or act, or just stop doing nothing. I simply slid my arm around her waist, and enjoyed the sound of monotonous, peaceful thundering waves crashing to the shore.

Why did there have to be anything else? There was no reason to speak. No reason to try to label things for which no labels have been created. We both knew what was there. We also both knew that after that night it would never be there again, even if we wanted it to be.

We made our way up to soft, dry sand. As we lay down next to each other, the sand was cool, and provided refuge against the throbbing heat of the night. I put my head back, gazing up into the black unknown. She gently placed her head on my chest, and our closing eyes led us both into dreams that would never come true.

DINNER ON SUNDAYS

By Denise Tagan

Pushing a meatball around on my plate, I thought I would just die if I heard Uncle Frank tell us, for the hundredth time, the story about the food shortages and waiting in bread lines during the Depression.

Listening to the smacking sounds his lips made while the food washed over and around the gaping spaces between his teeth, like clothes in an overheated dryer, I wondered how in the world he managed to slip forkfuls of spaghetti between the rush of words flowing from his dark, cavernous mouth.

Waving his arms in the air while he raved on and on, he used his knife like a spear, stabbing a sausage here or a pork chop there, pausing only briefly to swallow; then plunging forth like a logger cuts a spruce, he would saw fiercely into the hard crust of the fresh loaf of Italian bread that always sat on the wooden cutting board next to his plate.

Aunt Angie would skip dutifully around the table, ready to please any requests, while always looking over Uncle Frank's shoulder, monitoring the emptiness or fullness of his plate. Hardly ever taking a seat for herself, she danced a ballet of devotion to the tribe through her eagerness to please us with her cooking. Much like an over-bearing waitress in a crowded restaurant, she would ask us far too frequently, "How's everything? More bread. You need more bread? *Mange! Eat!!*"

Grunting like a clan of Neanderthals, my Italian family would nod "MORE!" in half comments. With their napkins tucked up under double chins, and mouths bulging with pasta, they slurped strands of linguini like it was their last supper. From the kitchen, an unending stream of red wine continued to fill goblets that were never more

than half empty, while the voice of Enrico Caruso floated in the background, playing on the ancient phonograph in the hallway, that sat underneath a large graphic painting of the Crucifixion which I could see from my place at the table, making me fear God for every morsel of food I couldn't eat....

"Angie!" Uncle Frank would eventually holler, "my pills!" Holding his chest, heaving heavy breaths, his three hundred pound body would shudder tremulous gasps of breath as he signaled to us all, with his fist pressed against his stomach, "*Acida*, it's my *acida*...Angie! My Pills!"

"I'm comin', Frank, for Christ's sake, I'm comin'!" Hovering over him like an attentive mother, her outstretched hand would hold the magic solution that always brought him dramatic momentary relief.

"Ahh!" He would announce after swallowing the pills and gulping a glass of seltzer, "Mucha better."

Whacking him on the side of the head, Aunt Angie would then likely yell, "Whatsa matter with you? I told you not to eat too many sausages!"

And we would all laugh as Uncle Frank waved his hands motioning some gesture of Italian sign language that seemed to have greater meaning beyond its translation. It was a regular ritual; finally, he would release two or three long, loud baritone belches and dinner would resume—as usual.

Once my mother and aunt cleared the dishes and the coffee was poured, the smell of homemade anisette tickled my nose as Uncle Frank carefully poured, for he and my father, two shots of the clear liconice liqueur into tiny glasses alongside the tiramisu, macaroons and canolis that graced the table for dessert.

"Salute!" my father would say, raising his glass to his older brother's, and together they would toast to the good old days; days that knew real hard times that happened long before I was born—times that only became real to me through the images of black and white movies on the small console television set that I would watch, sitting in my uncle's worn and overstuffed chair, with sleepy eyes and a full belly, in the front parlor of my aunt's old house, on Sunday afternoons.

ON THE RANGE

By Jason Robinson

Standing alone at Pt. 15,
Gazing through the sites of an M16,
You can see everything as it comes clearer.
Wind blows and everything sways:
The target moves, the grass moves, the rifle moves
You move, as one.

There is shooting all around you
But it is completely silent.
Concentration radiates from you.
Nothing can break your lock on that target
Until you've fired and the target falls,
And you find a new target.

NIGHTS

by Dan Horgan

Some nights I have trouble sleeping. Actually, I am stalked by insomnia more often than not, which can become a pretty big weight on a student's shoulders. Some nights, such as this one, I combat the insomnia with a walk outside, in the fresh air. This night is warm. Unseasonably warm for a New England December. It is so nice out, in fact, that I can stand outside in my shorts and not feel the slightest hint of discomfort. After walking three or four laps around my pool, I retire back inside to the stuffiness of my room to once again battle this formidable adversary.

My room is a cluttered mess. They say that creative people enjoy keeping their quarters in a never-ending state of disarray. Perhaps this is why sleep refuses to overthrow my current state of frustratingly numb consciousness. Maybe my mind wants to be creative right now, so late at night, and doesn't wish to give in to the necessity of sleep. Unfortunately for my mind, however, I have been cursed with hands that cannot create what my subconscious wants me to see. I try writing music, but my hands don't know where to go in order to make the sounds my mind hears. I try writing poetry, but it always seems very cliché to me. I know I have the mind of a poet, but, unfortunately, I have neither the vocabulary nor the know-how needed to make it special. It feels almost like having a curse—being able to think in creative ways, but possessing no outlet with which to express them.

I have spent many sleepless nights attempting to pinpoint the root of my worries and frustrations, and this is the closest I have come. Who knows? Maybe the solution to my problem is right under my nose and I just have to open my eyes wide enough to see it.

My window is open, so my room is less stuffy. My bed is also looking more inviting. So I think it is now time to pull up the sheets and save my

and save my frustration for another day. This time, with the lights off, the cool breeze across my bed, and my mind slightly more at ease, sleep comes without so much as a struggle.

ANNIVERSARY POEM

Anonymous

Why

as the tips of the petals curl and darken does
the rose grow yet more rare
and why do the years
so adorn your handsomeness?

Why

as I gaze at you asleep
and drink your breath
and touch the naked beauty of your soul
do tears come to my eyes?

Why old friend

does each new line on your face
pluck with ravenous fingers at my heart
and strike these chords of longing?

And what of the music flaming in my blood
and what of my throbbing flesh?

HOMEcoming

By Phyllis Kendall

I know I'm not in my own bed. This one is too narrow, too hard. Who are all these people? Should I know them? I'm so tired, much too tired to remember. I ask for my baby. Why doesn't anyone bring my baby? That tall gray-haired man leans over, kisses my forehead. "I'm here, Mom. I called the school. Billy's on his way. We'll all be here for you." Why does he call me "Mom"? Where's my baby? Someone holds a baby up for me to see. That's not my baby. My baby is wrapped in a blue blanket. I remember opening the blanket, carefully counting each curled finger, each tiny pink toe. Ten of each. And I remember the tears.

Why aren't you here yet? I've been waiting for you. Have you seen our baby? Ah, there you are, in the doorway. Same tousled hair. Must be windy out. I love that slightly lopsided grin of yours. You set your books on the floor like you always do. The gray-haired couple makes room for you. You kneel and kiss me. Just a peck on the cheek? Why, when I whisper your name, do you squinch up your brow with that puzzled look you sometimes get? You turn to the gray-haired couple, "Gram doesn't know me."

"Gram, it's me, Billy. Remember? I love you Gram."

No, I don't, but I know your name's not Billy, my dearest. I'm so tired, so tired of trying to remember. I close my eyes.

* * * * *

I do remember some things. Maybe just the important things.

You and I, running hand in hand through the open fields. Splotches of color at our feet. Red, yellows, oranges, all the budding promises of a

lovely season. I'm carrying a straw hat. The one you like, with the pink ribbons streaming down the back. You'd tucked a stem of white lilac buds in the band. I don't want that hat blown away. We tell each other we're taking a short cut to town. We know it's not; it's just more fun running together with the warm wind in our faces, my long loose hair trying to catch up.

In town we stop at the drug store. The clerk grins, "The usual?"

"The usual," you reply. You carry the soda, one soda, strawberry, the biggest they have, extra ice cream, and two long spoons and two straws. We sit at one of the little round tables in the back of the store, our heads bent over the soda. So many plans to make for next year, after you have your degree. A traditional wedding. I'll wear a long white gown, complete with train and veil. I'll carry a mixed bouquet, something as bright and colorful as the flowers in the fields.

We discuss children. "Six," I suggest.

"Four, two of each," you say.

"Six," I insist, smiling at you.

"Let's compromise, an even half-dozen."

We laugh. We laughed so easily then. Life was full of hope, promise, springtime.

Winter came. A Sunday in December. We were in Mom's kitchen, making fudge together, still making plans. You had a good position lined up for after graduation. I was doing pretty well at my secretarial job. We'd start with a tiny apartment. We'd skimp and save for a house of our own, separate bedrooms for each of our half-dozen kids.

Dad came to the doorway. He looked grim. "Come in the parlor. Both of you." It was a demand. Not at all like Dad.

We looked at each other, shrugged, and followed. Mom was sitting in her favorite blue chair, wiping her eyes. I remember the handkerchief. White linen with an edging of pink thread crocheted into a delicate lacy pattern--

one she'd made, turning a piece of plain cloth into an object of art.

Dad pointed to the radio. "Listen." Another demand. It was a good radio. You could even get police calls and short wave on it. Its fine wood was as shiny and as polished as the table it sat on. Mom liked things kept shiny and polished, especially that radio and the table that had been in Dad's family for over a hundred years.

I caught a few words of the broadcast. "...sneak attack...naval base...Pearl Harbor...casualties...war..."

WAR?

You stiffened, face flushed, fists clenched. "Filthy bastards! To hell with graduating! I'm enlisting!" I'd never heard you talk like that before.

You came home on leave before shipping out. We were married in the rectory parlor. You in your uniform. Me in my best suit, the blue one, and the funny little hat that matched. We didn't want bouquets or celebrations. Just each other. The priest blessed us, adding a special prayer for your safe return. I wondered how many other plans had been changed by the war.

I knew your APO by heart. You shared my joy that I was pregnant. "Boy or girl...doesn't matter...take good care of yourself and our little one...send pictures, full length, side view...wish I could be with you...looking forward to coming home...don't know when..."

The letters stopped coming.

Our baby is a boy. So precious, so tiny, so helpless. I hold him close, tight, not wanting the nurses to take him away. I let the tears run down onto his little blue blanket. Tears for all of us--you, me, him, the world....

* * * * *

...so tired...just want to sleep. I hear your voice, agonized, "Gram! Gram!"
...can't open my eyes...

It's so dark here. I'm frightened. No light. No moon. No stars. Nothing. There, ahead, a faint glimmer above a barrier. A barrier I know I can't cross alone.

My mind clears. I remember everything now, every moment of my life. Raising our son; the daughter-in-law who became my daughter, my friend; our grandchildren, especially Billy, the youngest, the image of you.

I stand now in awe. Someone is beside me. The darkness has parted round the radiance that surrounds him. I see the wounds in his wrists. He knows my name. I don't hear a voice but I know what he's telling me, ***It's OK. I'll help you across.***

We walk together. Now all is light, pure radiant light. I feel so peaceful, so serene just being near him. His pace slows. He's behind me. I turn. I don't want him to leave. He shows me a crowd of people. ***They've been waiting for you. Now go on ahead. I'll still be with you. I've always been with you.***

I walk slowly toward the crowd. I know without looking that he's behind me. I trust him. The crowd seems so far away, yet the faces become clearer. Friends, family, YOU!

You step just ahead of the others, arms open wide and curved, waiting. I run, I run fast, so fast the wind is beneath my feet.

I'm coming, darling! I'm coming home!

VALIDICTORY

by Jeanne Hue

It is with much trepidation that I await my graduation from these hallowed halls. But I can't for the life of me figure out why! I'm well into my middle years; it isn't as if I were going out into the cold, cruel world for the first time. Heaven knows, I've existed there for the past thirty-five years.

I think, rather, that I anticipate the loss of a way of life that I have thoroughly enjoyed for the past five years. Returning to school has given me the opportunity to find my own identity again. For too many years, I have been somebody's wife, or mother, or accountant. I haven't had the luxury of being just plain me for a long, long time.

I've thoroughly relished the school experience that I've had. I've loved my classes, my professors, the challenge of doing well, and the rich tapestry of knowledge acquired. I have discovered talents forgotten or not apparent five years ago. I have made so many friends that it boggles the mind. Some, I know, I will continue to see, even after our school days are over. Others will remain in my heart. I've found a wealth of strength within myself of which I was unaware—a discovery of how much I really can accomplish, if I put my mind to it.

I've had my favorite classes, special professors, memorable projects. I've learned, to my surprise, that young people have very good minds. It has long been the norm that many of my generation still look upon college students as half-formed, inexperienced children. Not so! I've found so many of my young classmates to be knowledgeable, articulate, bright, well-rounded individuals. Although they might lack some of the life experiences that I have encountered, they have had their own challenges, pertinent to their own world of today.

The disciplines forced upon me by my wish to excel at this academic endeavor will help me to meet the challenges I must now go back to face in my everyday life. And although I don't have to pound the job-seeking pavement, the time has come for me to treat my own small business as something other than an inconvenient diversion.

Yes, I'll probably return from time to time for a class that interests me, but it won't be the same. No longer will I be one of the "college kids" striving to meet the requirements of my degree program. Instead, I'll just be one of the older residents taking a class for fun. Oh, well—we all must grow up at some point in our lives. I guess this is mine.

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